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Politicized Prayer: How Thoughts and Prayers Hinder Gun Legislation

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Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Political Science and Public Service

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Introduction

On February 14, 2018, a gunman attacked Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. He killed 17 and injured another 17, making the Parkland shooting one of the deadliest school shootings in American history. Politicians from across the country offered their condolences and responses to the tragedy. Governor Rick Scott (R-Florida) tweeted, “Just spoke with @POTUS about shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. My thoughts and prayers are with the students, their families and the entire community. We will continue to receive briefings from law enforcement and issue updates” (Scott, 2018). Other politicians quickly followed suit. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) tweeted, “Heidi and my prayers are with the victims and families of those affected by today's senseless shooting in Florida. As always, we are grateful to the first responders who answered the call for help and quickly apprehended the attacker.” (Cruz, 2018). This was also a bipartisan trend. For example, Bill Nelson (D-Florida) tweeted, “Praying for everyone at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Just spoke with Broward Undersheriff to ensure they have everything they need. And just spoke to FBI to make sure all federal resources are being made available to help. Will continue to monitor closely.” He followed up with, “Let's just not talk about it. Let's do something about it. Let's make what happened at Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school a pivotal moment in this country's history, not because it was one of the largest mass shootings — but hopefully because it was the last” (Nelson, 2018). Senator Claire McCaskill (D-MO) released a statement saying, “Our children deserve so much more than our thoughts and prayers. If folks in Washington are serious about stopping senseless gun violence, we need to act” (Turner, 2018). These examples are a small snippet of the massive amounts of thought and prayers that are offered after a mass shooting. These sentiments are sent by people and organizations, both right-wing and left-wing.

The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Shooting gave national attention to gun policy, highlighting stances both for and against gun control. This particular shooting led to a larger discussion about gun violence, rather than sitting in the complacency of thoughts and prayers. In the wake of the shooting, students who had survived the attack utilized their grief and anger to create their own organization, March For Our Lives, who successfully started a conversation around gun reform rather than settling for thoughts and prayers from legislators. Emma Gonzalez, a founder and leader of March For Our Lives (MFOL) took the NRA head-on claiming “We call BS.” At a rally in Fort Lauderdale, Gonzalez stated, “Every single person up here today, all these people should be home grieving. But instead we are up here standing together because if all our government and President can do is send thoughts and prayers, then it's time for victims to be the change that we need to see” (CNN, 2018). Gonzalez sets up the current climate of gun legislation in the United States. After Gonzalez and other students began to speak up about gun reform, they caught nationwide attention, and made nationwide change. According to PEW research, “This was a year of unparalleled success for the gun-control movement in the United States. States across the country, including 14 with Republican governors, enacted 50 new laws restricting access to guns, ranging from banning bump stocks to allowing authorities to temporarily disarm potentially violent people” ([Vasilogambros](#), 2018). Though state measures were passed, reform still failed on a national level. This is due to a grid lock countrywide on how to address the problem of gun violence. The polarizing, divisive issue reduces down to two categories: those who advocate for gun control, and those who send their thoughts and prayers instead. Why would those who consider themselves proponents of gun rights use “thoughts and prayers” instead of a concrete solution using their own stances on gun

ownership and use? Is this use of thoughts and prayers strategic? That is, are people intentionally using thoughts and prayers to prevent gun legislation from being formed and passed?

Marjory Stoneman Douglas is not a one-off situation. Gun violence has been rising in the US, and along with it, the use of thoughts and prayers as a response. According to a recent Washington Post article, gun violence rose in frequency by 65 percent between 2013 and 2019. This includes 2,341 mass shootings that took the lives of 2,642 people and wounded 9,766 more (Hughes, 2020). This rise in gun violence would be thought to also lead into a rise of thoughts and prayers rhetoric. One of the major questions of this research is whether thoughts and prayer rise specifically after mass shootings. Ben Rowen in “What Science Says about ‘Thoughts and Prayers’” gives a breakdown of how prominent this language is in Congress. “Since the start of the legislative session on January 4, 1995, the Congressional Record identifies some 4,139 instances in which a congressperson took to the Senate or House floor to express their ‘thoughts and prayers.’ Given that the House has averaged 138 days in session a year and the Senate 162 since 2001, this equates to close to one ‘thoughts and prayers’ entered into the record per workday on the Hill” (Rowen, 2017). Outpourings of thoughts and prayers have historical precedent among religious communities, but why use them specifically after a tragic shooting? Is the use of thoughts and prayers isolated to instances of gun violence? The use of thoughts and prayers is prominent language after gun violence. However, little to no federal legislative action has been taken to prevent these tragedies from occurring again. Thoughts and prayers offer little in the way of substantive action.

To explore the potential strategy of thoughts and prayers as a political response, I will delve into a variety of sources and topics in order to attempt to prove the intentionality of the use of thoughts and prayers. To begin, I will establish the theories of the policy process and how this

applies to gun reform, specifically how thoughts and prayers rhetoric is not fully explored in said theories, specifically, the rhetorical use of thoughts and prayers. Next, I discuss gun culture in America, particularly the language used to describe support for guns and used in response to shootings. Then, I analyze modern media such as news articles and Twitter feeds to evaluate the ways in which thoughts and prayers are used by citizens, politicians, and organizations. The way that individuals see and use certain hashtags can show how many people actually are affected by this rhetoric, the way in which the rhetoric is actually used, and whether or not this rhetoric is being promoted by a certain coalition. I conclude with a discussion about the potential intentionality of such statements, as well as the sort of impact these statements have on gun reform as a whole.

Research Puzzle

The ways in which thoughts and prayers are sent after a mass shooting are intriguing. If thoughts and prayers are strategically sent, they could effectively clog the policy window after a mass shooting, making common-sense gun laws harder to pass. This would mean that citizens, politicians, and organizations that oppose gun measures being passed could use this language to their advantage. My hypothesis is yes, that thoughts and prayers are a strategic use in rhetoric from the gun lobby to hinder legislation. Applying this thought to the previous example of the Marjory Stoneman-Douglas shooting, though there was much momentum and a huge push for stricter gun laws nationwide, the only change seen at a national level was a ban on bump-stocks, which had been pushed for since the Las Vegas shooting in October of 2017 (Kramer & Harlon, 2019). State legislatures across the country took matters into their own hands, passing over 50 new state laws after Parkland. Nationally, the Parkland shooting was not the end of the national gridlock that exists around gun violence. The discussion following Parkland only deepened the

divide over how to solve the problem of gun violence. Could a reason that there was so much gridlock and so much opposition be that individuals were sending thoughts and prayers, rather than thinking of ways to prevent such a tragedy from occurring again? Based on this case, among many others, it seems that the usage of thoughts and prayers is a strategic move of the political right to halt, or at least slow down, talks of gun reform.

There is a puzzle implied by the above. Are thoughts and prayers aiding in the gridlock occurring around gun policy? Are thoughts and prayers strategically used to hinder gun reform? Though some states have successfully passed varying forms of gun legislation, there is no national standard. Why is it that federal measures have not been passed? To assess these questions I combine various aspects of policy theory into my own sort of framework. I borrow the policy window, agenda setting, and advocacy coalitions to tell a story of gun legislation using the narrative policy framework. Then, I will explore the ways in which gun policy has been specifically framed, and touch on America's complex history with guns, in order to build the narrative on which the Narrative Policy Framework will operate. Finally, there is a brief discussion about the language used after mass shootings in America, highlighting the usage of thoughts and prayers, as well as placing blame. This will be useful to tie in how thoughts and prayers specifically are impacting the policy narrative around gun legislation. The language used in the wake of a mass shooting leads to major policy implications, making this section important to the research. This will lead into my own research delving into the way that citizens, politicians, and organizations use twitter and other media to project thoughts and prayers after a mass shooting.

Literature Review

The Policy Process

To begin addressing the questions around rhetoric and gun legislation, one must first understand various ideas about policy formation. To better understand why rhetoric, specifically the usage of thoughts and prayers, is so pertinent to the way we understand the formation of gun policy, it is important to explore some aspect of policy theory. To create policy, an issue first has to be brought to the national agenda. Many times, especially in the context of gun reform, the issue is brought to the agenda by a focusing event. A focusing event narrows the national focus on one issue. One of the ways to understand what happens once gun reform is on the national agenda is through the policy window. The Multiple Streams theory basically asserts that there are three independent channels for policy making: politics, policy, and problem. For policy change to effectively happen, all three streams have to work together. A huge factor in this change happening would involve the opening of what is known as a policy window. A policy window occurs just after a focusing event, in the case of gun violence, a mass shooting. The window brings together all three streams: a focusing event that highlights the problem, a rise in attention to the policy, and a cooperative push to action that influences the politics. This framework is helpful to this research because of the policy window. The timing and attention of this window is key to whether measures are passed or not. There is a gap here, wherein rhetorical use has not been explored. Though there could be clogs in the policy window, those clogs are relatively unexplored. Thoughts and prayers dominating and clogging this window would effectively block legislation, which is what this research seeks to fill.

Agenda setting, at its core, is a struggle over the definition of a problem. It shows the ways that different groups, or coalitions, frame the same issue. With gun violence, some would

frame the issue as one of gun access, wherein we need more background checks, a ban on high capacity magazines, and make gun trafficking a federal crime. Others would argue that the problem is not with the gun itself, but with individuals, and that we should perform background checks, along with teaching about gun safety. The dissonance lies not in the problem itself, but in how each group defines the problem. Deborah Stone describes it in terms of causality, saying “In the world of policy there is always choice about which causal factors in the lineage to address, and different choices locate the responsibility and burden of reform differently” (Stone, 1989). This can also affect the perceived urgency of a problem. The way that one group may define and set the agenda would place a severe urgency on gun measures, where another group may think this issue is actually less worrisome than many others that have to be dealt with. The role of agenda setting is key in deciding which issues receive attention and which do not. In the policy area of gun legislation, the agenda becomes focused around guns largely when there is a policy window, as mentioned above. Many politicians have their own agenda when it comes to gun policy, many of those agendas influenced by donations and lobbyists. The agenda has been set long before the policy window opens, so when there is discussion of gun policy, opinions are not made in the moment. Instead, they have been built over time. The way an issue is framed, or the agenda that has been set, is important to this research because of the long, divisive narrative on gun policy in the United States. These beliefs have been long-held and have fundamentally different understandings. Thoughts and prayers dominate just one side of the gun debate and are built into their agenda to prevent gun reform from passing.

Another way that problem definition is highlighted is through the advocacy coalition framework. An advocacy coalition is a group of actors that share a goal and cooperate to achieve that policy goal by influencing legislators and other government entities. In gun policy, there are

many coalitions at play. Broadly, there are gun rights and gun control coalitions, but both can be broken down into many actors, organizations, and individuals. These groups define the problem as different from one another, leading to fundamental differences in how they believe the policies should be formed. Advocacy coalition framework also asserts that you have to look at policy change happening incrementally, as a long process that has been happening for an extended period of time. Likewise, gun policy is nothing new, and has been building over time within each coalition. These long-held mindsets are hard to change, making substantial policy change difficult. This research seeks to fill the gap in the way that coalitions use rhetoric to their own advantage. Thoughts and prayers, again, are tied to a specific coalition, being used as a tool for their agenda. Since it is a coalition, we must understand that this strategy affects all sorts of groups within the coalition, including individuals, groups, political figures, government agencies, businesses, and other organizations.

The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) is a framework for understanding the way policy is shaped, framed, and eventually implemented. When looking at gun policy, the Narrative Policy Framework helps to frame the formation of policy over time like a story. Looking at thoughts and prayers as a key component to the plot of gun policy, this framework has the space for language to be analyzed. Combining this framework with aspects of the aforementioned theories builds the strongest complete theory for discussing the ways that thoughts and prayers influence gun policy. The NPF seeks to understand the way a story is made and how that translates to policy success and political action. This approach is helpful in terms of gun legislation because it helps make sense of the formal actors of the argument (floor debates, testimonies) as well as informal actors in the policy debate (media). At a very basic level, this framework pinpoints setting, characters, plot, and a moral of the story that affect the long-term

narrative around the policy, in this case, guns and gun policy. There are multiple strategies that can be used within the NPF to explain a phenomenon, and though this paper will touch all three, it will largely focus on the causal mechanism strategy. Causal mechanism strategy seeks to assign responsibility for a policy problem. It creates a link from the source of the issue to the issue at large (Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, & Radelli, 2018).

The framing of an issue and the coalitions surrounding an issue have major impacts in the policy process. The beliefs and advocacy on either side of the debate really get tested when a policy window is opened up. The policy window is where change is most likely to happen but can easily become gridlocked in partisan arguments. To best understand the rhetorical use of thoughts and prayers in the United States, it is best to first understand these key concepts. In this paper, I will apply these concepts to the narrative policy framework. Agenda setting and advocacy coalitions help in understanding the characters in the narrative. The way in which there are fundamental differences, as well as subtle nuances, in the definition of the problem of gun violence help in understanding the ways both sides are coming at the issue. It makes little sense to send thoughts and prayers if you believe the issue is large capacity magazines, but it makes perfect sense to one who believes that the issue is a lack of faith in schools and society. These differing definitions of the problem tend to clump into large coalitions, giving them major power in the way policy is shaped. Policy window helps the understanding of the setting, outlining the specific time constraints that politicians and activists are under to create meaningful change. In this research specifically, the policy window after a mass shooting opens up time for legislation to be passed. However, if this window is clogged with thoughts and prayers instead of meaningful change, this window is wasted. These basic ideas help to form a more accurate narrative, telling a larger story about gun policy.

Framework

America and Guns

There is an existing body of literature on gun policy in the United States and the way it has been shaped and changed over the years. Gun policy is analyzed in lots of different ways, but rarely is put into a narrative lens using the Narrative Policy Framework. This research fills a perceived gap, wherein the larger narrative of gun policy will be analyzed. The literature knows lots about gun culture and also gun policy, yet there seems to be a gap in those being reconciled together. Beyond this, the significant role of language seems to be missing from the current research on gun policy.

To apply narrative policy framework to gun reform, the theory constructs a narrative surrounding an event, when regarding gun legislation, this event is typically a mass shooting. Melissa Merry in her “Angels versus Devils: The Portrayal of Characters in the Gun Policy Debate” uses the NPF to describe the actors present in gun policy debates. She focuses on another strategy of the NPF, devil-angel shift. The “devil shift” describes the mentality in which opponents are seen as more malicious and powerful than they actually are (Sabatier, Hunter, & McLaughlin, 1987). On the other hand, the “angel shift” refers to the elevation of one’s own stance (Leach & Sabatier, 2005). Both of these definitions are important in the NPF, which highlights the ideals of villains versus heroes. Using the Twitter accounts of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, the NRA, and Gun Owners of America, Merry finds that both sides of the issue focus more prominently on an angel shift rather than a devil one. Knowing that both sides of the issue are prone to elevate their own stance is helpful in looking into how narratives are formed (Merry, 2019). This highlights the idea of an advocacy coalition, even though it is not explicitly using the advocacy coalition framework.

Advocacy coalitions, having long standing beliefs, and a wise system of people involved in them, are more likely to elevate their own stance, or put down the other. This is helpful in evaluating various sources discussing gun violence. A modern piece in the way these narratives are formed is through social media. Many use this medium to tell a story of a mass shooting, or what is the perceived story of a mass shooting.

A changing variable in the way gun violence is received by the public is social media. Twitter is a means of news for most millennials and Gen Z. Merry explores the way that social media frames policies in “Constructing Policy Narratives in 140 Characters or Less: The Case of Gun Policy Organizations.” Using the Twitter accounts for the Brady Campaign and the NRA, she finds that both frame towards victims rather than perpetrators. It is noted that this could be, in part, to the FBI’s “Don’t Name Them” campaign, which discourages the media from giving the perpetrator wanted attention (Gerber, 2014). The full implications of the research are nuanced, being as each tweet contains a narrative, while also a thread of tweets from the day, week, month, etc. also contain a narrative. This is helpful in knowing how narratives are continually constructed around gun policy (Merry 2016). For this research, the narratives that are constructed via social media are important, giving insight to the agenda of each individual that sends them and the coalition that they are affiliated with. A seemingly quick tweet after a mass shooting helps to build a larger narrative about gun policy.

This research is helpful in gun policy, but still largely leaves a gap in terms of specific language used after instances of gun violence. Though Merry looks at positive and negative talk, and social media, she does not capture a specific phrase that may be to blame for hindrance of policy from happening. The increased use of social media is prominent, and though there are lots of phrases and sentiments sent in the wake of mass shootings, there is a high concentration of

thoughts and prayers. This specific rhetoric may be partially to blame, and points to a gap in the literature that I seek to fill.

Language and Guns

An important consideration in the discussion on gun policy is the role that rhetoric plays. The way in which a mass shooting is framed and discussed has huge impacts on the way gun policy is viewed by the public. Why are thoughts and prayers sent? It is first important to understand tragedy. Mass shootings would be considered tragedies, creating a unique space in which many organizations (and individuals) are neither the victim or the perpetrator; however they may feel the need to respond due to the communal nature of tragedy, wherein a group is collectively mourning. “Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims” explores the ways in which tragedies are covered by organizations on social media. The study finds that many feel the need to respond to such a tragedy from a moral or social obligation (Hayes, Waddell, & Smuddle, 2017). Individuals feel societal pressure or are motivated by sympathy to make a statement following a tragedy. This typically involves some sort of consolation for the victim’s families, often taking the explicit shape of “thoughts and prayers.” These responses may also seek to assign blame. Hayes asserts that, “In the case of bombings or school shooters, we also search for causes, whether it is mental instability (Kotz, 2013) or extreme religious indoctrination (Associated Press, 2013), and a broader conversation is likely started around those issues.” (Hayes, p. 260). The blame-placing is a prominent theme in gun reform discourse. This blame often shifts the focus from guns themselves to a different issue. Though the blame may be well-intentioned, it could also be a strategic move to distract from gun legislation.

Based on the above, I would assert three major hypotheses: that the rhetorical use of thoughts and prayers would rise sharply after a mass shooting, that the use would be centered in one coalition, and that the use of thoughts and prayers is intentional.

Research Design

The ways in which thoughts and prayers are sent after a mass shooting are intriguing. Is the use of this language intentional? Does it aid in clogging the policy window after a mass shooting so that common-sense gun laws are harder to pass? My assumption is yes, thoughts and prayers are a strategic use in rhetoric from the gun lobby to hinder legislation. By using thoughts and prayers, the religious tones mobilize a mass amount of conservative Protestant adherents to use the same rhetoric. “Conservative Protestants are more likely to view Christianity and ideas of ‘America’ as closely fused” (Froese and Mencken, 2009; Hughes, 2003). These types of views lead Christians to believe that American ideals have substantial religious origin and backing. “Under these interpretations the second amendment of the constitution is granted considerable religious legitimization.” (Stroope & Tom, 149). By analyzing the ways thoughts and prayers are poured out after a mass shooting, we can better prepare for how to make the most of a policy window the next time one occurs. It also would aid in understanding the populations at play on both sides of the gun debate, and religion could be used to promote common-sense gun laws as well. I believe it is likely that the strong emotional tie to religion plays a huge role in the way gun legislation is framed and opinions are formed. It is important to recognize that not all who consider themselves religious would fall into this category. Some Christians both blame sin and guns. Miller, 2013 says, “As long as there are broken humans on this earth, there will be violence and death. However, we cannot hide behind this spiritual reality as an excuse for inaction. Sinful people kill people, but guns sure do make it a lot easier” (Miller, 2013). Is religion being used as

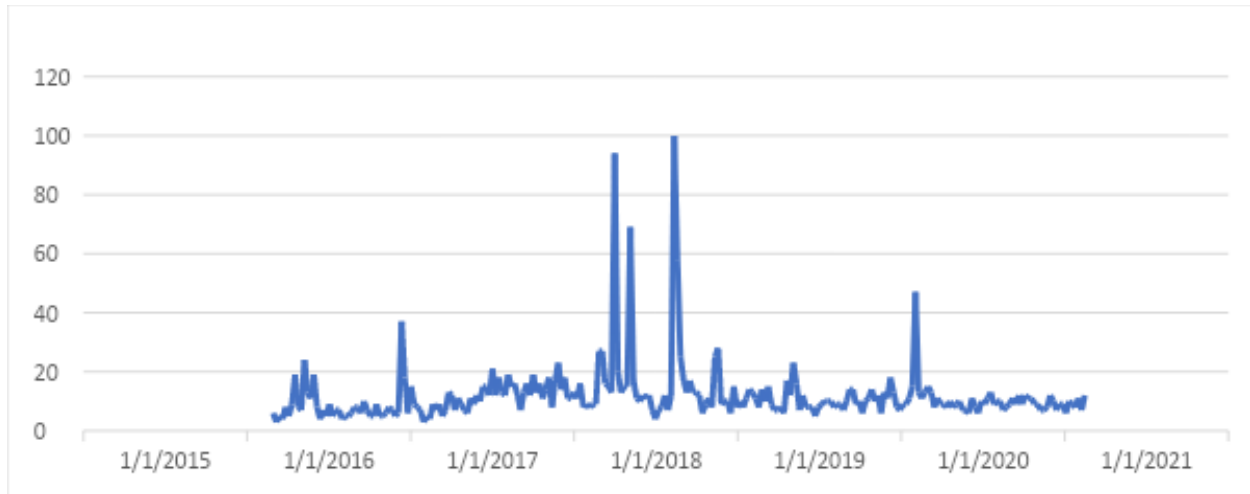
a tool to excuse inaction? I will explore the way that thoughts and prayers are used after a mass shooting and discuss whether or not this encourages passivity.

To explore the way that thoughts and prayers pervade American gun politics, I will utilize the changing media landscape to determine the amount of thoughts and prayers sent, the language explicitly used, and the times in which they are sent. To accomplish this, I will apply the narrative policy framework to the current topic of gun reform, seeking to establish causality between the sending of thoughts and prayers and the hindrance of gun legislation by analyzing the way that various characters in the gun policy debate use the rhetoric, which in turn impact the plot. The narrative policy framework focuses on policy framing similar to storytelling, using setting, characters, plot, and a moral of the story. The setting has been established through the literature review, but to maintain clarity, the setting for this analysis is the political environment in times directly after an incident of mass gun violence. Next comes a discussion of the characters in this narrative. I will begin by analyzing the trends as a whole, highlighting the way everyday citizens interact with the rhetoric. Why do these citizens interact this way? They are following the leads of prominent politicians, so next, I will explore the way specific politicians utilize the rhetoric. Why do politicians interact this way? To answer this, I will look at the way the gun lobby as a whole engages with thoughts and prayers. Together, all of these players create a system of characters to be utilized in the narrative policy framework. These characters' uses of thoughts and prayers can then be linked to the outcomes of gun reform in the wake of a mass shooting.

Citizen's Use of Thoughts and Prayers

To begin, I explore Google. Google has a feature called Google trends, which allows you to see how often a term has been searched over a set period of time. For this research, I searched thoughts and prayers over the past five years. The results are shown below in Table 1.

Google trends, “thoughts and prayers”- Table 1

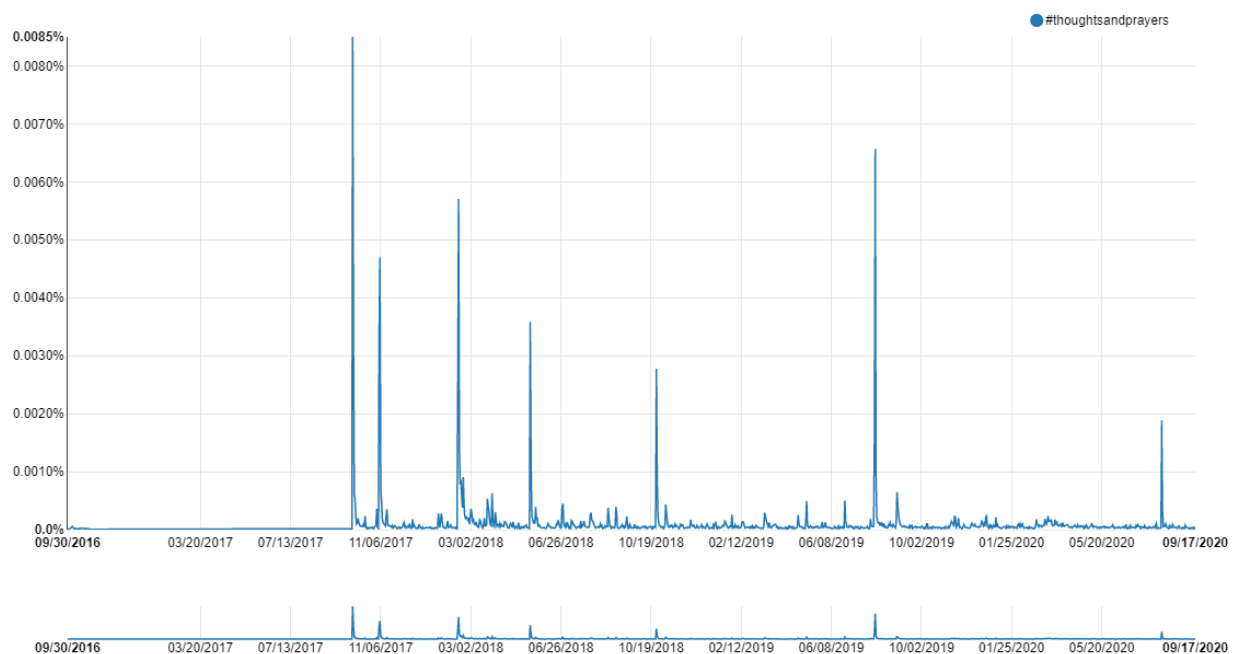


The google searches in the United States between August 30, 2015, and today show trends in the way thoughts and prayers are searched. There are four main spikes in the data, meaning that searches rose sharply four separate times in this five-year time frame. Coincidentally, all of these spikes occur directly after a mass shooting (October 1, 2017: Las Vegas (59 deaths), November 5, 2017: Sutherland Springs (26 deaths), February 14, 2018: Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (17 deaths), August 3, 2019: El Paso (23 deaths)). Why is it that the spikes occur after deadly shootings? There are other horrific events that happen all over the country on a daily basis, and plenty of religious and social events centered around thought and prayer. Why then, would mass shootings be localized in this way? These spikes show that public interest is sparked by this rhetoric, causing them to search for it. The searches are concentrated around mass shootings largely because that is the language used by media, politicians, and coalitions to

describe the event. This data confirms that thoughts and prayers rise after shootings, this is not just an assumption.

When thinking of how the media frames a tragedy, social media should not be overlooked (Hemphill, Culotta, & Heston, 2013). Because of this, I also looked into Twitter data to investigate the use of the hashtag #thoughtsandprayers. This would not indicate a simple search for thoughts and prayer, but instead, an intentional use and share of an account's sentiment of thoughts and prayers.

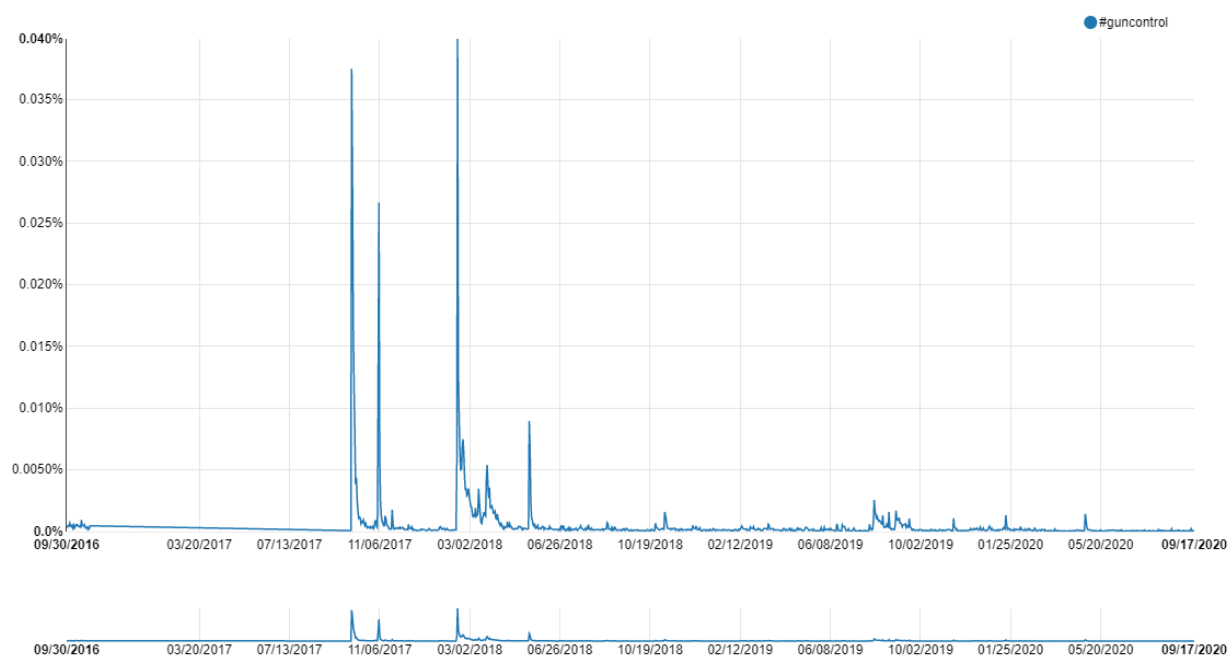
OSoMe, #thoughtsandprayers -Table 2



Like the Google Trends data, there are specific spikes in the times that #thoughtsandprayers were tweeted by users. These all occur after mass shootings, with one exception for the explosion in Beirut in August of 2020. (10/1/2017- 0.0085%- Las Vegas, 11/5/2017- 0.0047%- Sutherland Springs, 2/14/2018- 0.0057%- MSD, 5/17/2018- 0.0036%- Santa Fe, 10/2018- Pittsburg synagogue, 8/3/2019- 0.0066%- El Paso, 8/5/2020- 0.0019%- Beirut explosion) Again, this data shows that thoughts and prayers do, in fact, rise in the wake of a mass shooting. In addition,

everyday citizens are interacting with this rhetoric. They do this by seeing it, using it, or searching for it. No matter their relationship with the rhetoric, thoughts and prayers are clogging people's attention after a mass shooting. The spikes in the data show just how prevalent this language is for everyday people. Because of these interactions with the rhetoric, individuals' attentions are diverted from policy fixes to a victim-centered mindset. Though this is not necessarily a bad thing, to create effective change and prevent future tragedy, this victim-centered approach of mourning must be paired with policy plans to keep future victims safe.

OSoMe, #guncontrol- Table 3



I also felt it was necessary to analyze the opposing side, searching the frequency of the hashtag use of “gun control.” Though larger in number of uses, the amount of times this hashtag trends is much lower than thoughts and prayers, resulting in only four spikes over four years, as opposed to seven spikes in the thoughts and prayers data. (Spikes occurring after 10/1/2017- 0.037%- Las Vegas, 11/5/2017- 0.027%- Sutherland Springs, 2/14/2018- 0.040%- MSD, 5/17/2018- 0.0090%- Santa Fe) Compared to thoughts and prayers, the hashtag use of gun

control occurs much less frequently. This is true even when only comparing mass shootings. Gun control only rises after a select few incidents of gun violence. Thoughts and prayers prove to be the more common response after a mass shooting. This confirms the first hypothesis, that thoughts and prayers would rise sharply after a mass shooting.

Why would thoughts and prayers pervade everyday discourse about gun control? It is reasonable to believe that citizens would be following some sort of lead, perhaps the lead of their elected officials, or other prominent political figures. Does this same sort of rhetoric show up on a political level, used by national officials? To explore the way politicians use thoughts and prayers, I isolate the politicians that receive the most donations from gun rights and gun control donors.

Politician's Use of Thoughts and Prayers

Citizens are likely following the lead of prominent politicians, looking to them to see how to properly respond to a mass shooting (Gilens & Murakawa, 2002). To narrow the search, I used the top ten political recipients of gun rights donations, as well as gun control donations. I analyzed these politicians on their use of “thoughts and prayers” following acts of gun violence.

Top recipients of contributions from gun-rights donors

CANDIDATE	OFFICE	AMOUNT
Cruz, Ted (R-TX)	Senate	\$309,021
McSally, Martha (R-AZ)	House	\$227,928
Scalise, Steve (R-LA)	House	\$132,831
Nunes, Devin (R-CA)	House	\$95,093
Blackburn, Marsha (R-TN)	House	\$85,168
Heller, Dean (R-NV)	Senate	\$76,713
James, John (R-MI)	Senate	\$75,099

Ryan, Paul (R-WI)	House	\$65,347
Scott, Rick (R-FL)	Senate	\$61,752
Hawley, Josh (R-MO)	Senate	\$59,760

Source: OpenSecrets.org

To analyze the way the characters in the narrative play into the story behind “thoughts and prayers” rhetoric, I look into the reactions of the NRA’s top beneficiaries after mass shootings. I assume that those receiving large donations from gun rights groups will offer thoughts and prayers after a mass shooting in addition to defending gun rights.

As early as 2012, Paul Ryan offered thoughts and prayers after a shooting in Oak Creek, Wisconsin in a Sikh temple. Ryan offered his condolences on Twitter saying, “My thoughts and prayers are with the victims, their families and everyone in Oak Creek who has been impacted by this tragic act of violence” (Ryan, 2012). In December of the same year, the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary school killed 20 six and seven-year-olds, as well as 6 staff members. A year later, former Nevada Senator Dean Heller said, “Our thoughts and prayers will continue to be with all those who are grieving in the wake of this truly horrific event” (Jones). Though there was no definitive statement made by Ted Cruz, he did actively vote against measures that were proposed as a direct result of Sandy Hook (Collins, 2015). In this case, it is seen that thoughts and prayers are empty. Politicians often send thoughts and prayers, and then follow up with no action. Cruz voting against measures proposed after Sandy Hook exemplifies the ways that thoughts and prayers have larger implications. It is not simply a debate about language, but has real-world effects that could save many lives.

In December 2015, a terrorist attack consisting of a mass shooting and attempted bombing occurred in San Bernardino, California. Many prominent gun rights politicians poured

out their thoughts and prayers in the wake of this tragedy. Texas Senator Ted Cruz tweeted, “Our prayers are with the victims, their families, and the first responders in San Bernardino who willingly go into harm’s way to save others” (Cruz, 2015). Arizona Senator Martha McSally also tweeted saying, “As this tragic story develops, praying for all those impacted in #SanBernadino” (McSally, 2015). “Our nation mourns for the #SanBernardino community. Praying for peace for the state of California and for safety for the first responders,” said Representative Steve Scalise (Scalise, 2015). Additionally, then Speaker of the House Paul Ryan tweeted, “Please keep the victims of #SanBernardino, California in your prayers” (Ryan, 2015). The San Bernardino shooting had a huge public response, yet few measures were taken following the incident. The terrorist attack that occurred was met with thoughts and prayers, but little else.

The Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida in June 2016 was one of the deadliest in American history at the time, killing 49 and injuring 53 others. In response, Ted Cruz stated, “Enough is enough. What we need is for every American — Democrat and Republican — to come together, abandon political correctness, and unite in defeating radical Islamic terrorism.” (Cruz, 2016). This is interesting to note because even though Cruz does not send his thoughts and prayers, he does blame religious extremism instead of addressing gun laws. Senator McSally offered up her thoughts and prayers tweeting, “My thoughts and prayers go out to the victims and their families following this morning's horrific shooting in Orlando” (McSally, 2016). This seems to be a typical pair and pattern: giving thoughts and prayers, placing blame, and avoiding legislation.

Though Orlando was deadly, one could not imagine the impact of America’s next deadly mass shooting. The mass shooting in Las Vegas, Nevada at a concert on October 1, 2017 killed 58 and injured over 500 people. The deadliest mass shooting in American history left many at a

loss for words, but many prominent politicians continued to offer thoughts and prayers. Ted Cruz tweeted, “Lifting up in prayer all impacted by last night's despicable shooting in Las Vegas & all 1st responders on the scene” (Cruz, 2017). Martha McSally also took to Twitter saying, “I am deeply saddened by last night's devastating shooting in Las Vegas. My thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their loved ones” (McSally, 2017). Representative Steve Scalise, who himself had been shot earlier in the year at a congressional fundraiser said, “Jennifer and I are praying for the victims of this unspeakable violence in Las Vegas” (Scalise, 2017). Dean Heller also tweeted his condolences saying, “Senseless, horrifying act of violence in Las Vegas tonight. Praying for all the victims & those impacted by the tragedy” (Heller, 2017). The largest mass shooting in the nation’s history warranted an outpouring of thoughts and prayers, yet again, there were little to no measures taken as a response. Though there was a push for red flag laws, for expanded background checks, and a ban on high capacity magazines, it took almost two years for them to get to Congress, where a Trump impeachment diverted attention (Sanchez, 2019). Had these politicians advocated for change rather than offering thoughts and prayers, these issues could have reached a national debate sooner, increasing the chance of preventing another tragedy.

The above shootings were met with the typical response when a policy window is opened. Attention was given to these shootings for a short period of time, in which no major gun legislation was passed. The tides turned a bit on February 14, 2018. A gunman opened fire in Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, killing 17 and injuring another 17. Politicians soon began pouring out responses, largely in part to the fact that many victims were students. In addition to the tweets mentioned at the beginning of the paper, this shooting garnered many more prominent responses. Senator McSally tweeted, “Today’s #Parkland shooting was a tragedy. No

parent should ever have to worry about their child's safety as they head off to school" (McSally, 2018). Dean Heller, and Paul Ryan also tweeted condolences, saying "Lynne and I are heartbroken for those impacted by the senseless act of violence at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. We are praying for the victims and their families, the school's students and faculty, as well the entire Parkland, FL community," and "This is one of those moments where we just need to step back and count our blessings. We need to think less about taking sides and fighting each other politically and just pulling together. This House and the whole country stands with the Parkland community." (Heller, 2018; Killough, 2018). These tweets are prime examples of the diversion of attention away from gun control measures. McSally turns the issue to frame it as public safety, highlighting that parents should want their child protected. Of course, when teased out, this leads to two trains of thought based on the way you frame the issue. One thought would be to pass gun control measures, and the other would be to get more guns to the "good guys" to prevent a tragedy from happening. Senator McSally intentionally leaves this possibility open. Ryan's response also highlights the diversion from the issue. He explicitly says that "we need to think less about taking sides." By saying this, he is subtly encouraging people to not worry about fighting for or against gun measures. Taking the policy window into account, not fighting for gun measures immediately following mass shootings inhibits gun reform in the long-run. Though spun to be bigger than politics and focused on victims, this statement is very political guilt-tripping those who would push for control by saying that they need to "step back and count [their] blessings." The reaction to Parkland was vastly different than some of the other mass shootings mentioned, in which the survivors of the shooting mobilized, and did so quickly. The young people that stepped up and created March For Our Lives effectively utilized the policy window, rather than the typical pattern of a shooting: a public response, and no legislative action. Though

there was little legislative action taken after Parkland, these students succeeded in getting gun policy onto the agenda at a national level.

Though the tides turned after Parkland, mass shootings did not. In May of 2018, another high school encountered gun violence first-hand. This time it was in Santa Fe, New Mexico, killing 10. Ted Cruz again offered thoughts and prayers, “Heidi and I are keeping all the students and faculty at Santa Fe High School in our prayers this morning, along with all first responders on the scene. Please be safe and heed warnings from local officials.” (Cruz, 2018). Congressman Steve Scalise chose to place blame saying, “Maybe we need to put more faith in religion and God back in the schools to teach the kind of values so where you won't want to just go and kill your own classmates.” (Hayes, 2018). Scalise’s tweet highlights an interesting point. He invokes religious rhetoric, the same as with thoughts and prayers. By bringing up religion, he pulls out a strong emotional tie in anyone who would consider themselves religious. Though this may seem trivial, Protestant Christians make up over one third of the American population (Stroope & Tom 2017). In addition, Studies have shown that the statistically average gun owner is Protestant (Yamane, 2017). By using religious language, Scalise unites a huge percentage of Americans under their God. He also is uniting gun owners in this statement. By placing blame on character and morals, and highlighting people who statistically already own a gun, he moves the attention away from guns on and on to morality. This shift hinders gun legislation. The same type of move is seen after the shooting in Thousand Oaks, California that killed 13. Tennessee Senator Marsha Blackburn immediately held fast to the Second Amendment and placed blame on mental health saying, “What we do is say, how do we make certain that we protect the Second Amendment and protect our citizens? We’ve always done that in this country. Mental health issues need to be addressed” (Watts, 2018). By immediately clinging to the second amendment and blaming

mental health, she shifts the conversation from gun policy to healthcare. Though she gives no concrete plan on how to address mental health issues, she moves the conversation away from the gun itself and shifts focus to the perpetrator.

When a gunman opened fire from his car in Midland, Texas, killing eight, Ted Cruz released a statement to his home state stating, “Heidi and I are heartbroken by this heinous attack, and we are lifting up in prayer all the victims, their families, and the entire Midland-Odessa community. We are thankful for the law enforcement officers who heroically risked their lives and acted swiftly to stop the shooter and save others. Their courage helped prevent even more senseless deaths, and we honor their tireless commitment to protecting us all. We Texans are standing together tonight united against all forms of hatred and violence.” (Cruz, 2019). After another Texas shooting, this time at a Walmart in El Paso, Cruz released a statement saying, “We must speak clearly to combat evil in any form it takes. What we saw yesterday was a heinous act of terrorism and white supremacy. There is no place for this in El Paso, in Texas, or anywhere across our nation. We are all Americans and we are all standing united with El Paso” (Cruz, 2019). Though Cruz does not offer thoughts or prayers in this statement, he does highlight evil. This seemingly simple word still invokes religious undertones in his statement, making a clear dichotomy between good and evil. He does; however, define this evil as terrorism and white supremacy, taking no stance on the gun itself. Senator Blackburn also offered her prayers to the victims tweeting, “It is with sadness that we have learned of today’s shooting in El Paso. Thank you to the local law enforcement that apprehended the shooter. Our prayers go out to those injured. Our deepest sympathy, thoughts and prayers for families who have experienced the loss of life” (Blackburn, 2019).

Referencing back to the literature, these politicians that send thoughts and prayers in addition to receiving gun rights donations have some key similarities. Many of these statements send thoughts and prayers as a way to supposedly protect victims and their families from the politics of guns following mass shootings. The thoughts and prayers sent by this group often also are a way of placing blame, directing attention to God and religion as the way to fix the situation, rather than gun control measures. For many, the content shared after a mass shooting places blame on a decline of God in schools, as well as a decline in traditional values (Merino, 2018). American conservative Protestantism has a rooted theological understanding of original sin, a sin that has tainted all humanity since its happening. Because of this understanding, these individuals tend to see social problems as rooted in corrupted interpersonal relationships. They also view “the system” as a way to place blame for one’s personal sin. (Emerson, 401). This, in turn, plays into the notion as “the system” as being bad and sinful. These thoughts open the potential for “thoughts and prayers” to be the saving of America, not humankind and their broken and fallible laws. This reasoning would be void of a concrete plan as to how to deal with violence, but instead places blame, and entices public emotion. However, “There is no logical necessity between praying and not pursuing gun-control policies, but recent history has shown that, in practice, prayer has not been followed up by this kind of policy action” (Rowen, 2017). If these politicians genuinely are mourning and want to end such tragedy, there would logically be some sort of action following these thoughts and prayers. However, the narrative paints a different picture, one in which prayers are offered and then nothing follows.

To compare, I also analyzed the tweets of politicians who receive donations from gun control groups. The thoughts and prayers poured out by these politicians can largely be grouped into two categories: the passing of a prominent public figure, or after a mass shooting. However,

the tweets from gun-control advocating politicians that offer thoughts and prayers have some key differences compared to gun-rights advocating politicians.

Top recipients of contributions from gun-control donors

CANDIDATE	OFFICE	AMOUNT
Kaine, Tim (D-VA)	Senate	\$87,133
Warren, Elizabeth (D-MA)	Senate	\$60,888
Baldwin, Tammy (D-WI)	Senate	\$50,057
Brown, Sherrod (D-OH)	Senate	\$49,303
Nelson, Bill (D-FL)	Senate	\$44,780
McCaskill, Claire (D-MO)	Senate	\$43,515
Crow, Jason (D-CO)	House	\$36,982
Tester, Jon (D-MT)	Senate	\$36,810
Wexton, Jennifer (D-VA)	House	\$34,115
Hill, Katie (D-CA)	House	\$31,628

Source: OpenSecrets.org

In a general assembly speech after a shooting at Virginia Tech, Senator Tim Kaine said, “We need more than thoughts and prayers; we need action” (Kaine, 2019). Tammy Baldwin after the Pulse nightclub shooting tweeted, “Our thoughts and prayers are no longer enough. We have got to come together & take action. [#OrlandoUnited](#)” (Baldwin, 2016). These tweets already show a stark contrast to the politicians receiving funds from gun rights groups. Kaine and Baldwin both speak to the gap that thoughts and prayers create. That gap is simply a lack of action. Kaine says there is more that we can do, and Baldwin asserts that they are not enough. These politicians are using thoughts and prayers as a jumping point for getting to more action and policy.

After the Las Vegas shooting, Elizabeth Warren tweeted, “Thoughts & prayers are NOT enough. Not when more moms & dads will bury kids this week, & more sons & daughters will grow up without parents.” She followed with, “Tragedies like Las Vegas have happened too many times. We need to have the conversation about how to stop gun violence. We need it NOW” (Warren, 2017). Bill Nelson, in addition to his statement following Marjory Stoneman Douglas, also released a statement after Las Vegas, tweeting “Thoughts & prayers are with the victims of this horrific attack. At some point we, as a society, have to stand up and say enough is enough” (Nelson, 2017). Katie Hill tweeted after the shooting saying, “Sending thoughts and prayers are simply not enough. 58 people dead and over 500 wounded by a lone gunman. We have to take action” (Hill, 2017). The responses to Las Vegas by these politicians all highlight the need for action. Warren and Nelson, both religious, also send their thoughts and prayers, yet continue to say that action is also needed. They show that it does not have to be an either/or situation, but that true religious sentiment can be followed with change, action, and advocacy. This example sets a trend generally for how politicians on the gun-control side of the debate frame their responses. They either offer thoughts and prayers or recognize them as weak, and then follow up with a call to action. This holds true for many shooting responses.

Tammy Baldwin spoke out after a synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh saying that the victims and their families “are indeed in my thoughts and prayers. But I want to join so many who say that thoughts and prayers are no longer enough on our part when we hear tragedy after tragedy... This has got to stop and we have got to exercise our power, our voices and our votes to do everything we can” (Glauber, 2018). Senator Tim Kaine tweeted after the Virginia Beach shooting that killed 13 saying, “I’m devastated to learn of the tragic shooting tonight in Virginia Beach. My heart is with everyone who lost a loved one, and I’m praying for a swift recovery for

all those who have been injured.” He replied a few minutes later saying, “As we mourn this tragedy in our Commonwealth, I want Virginians to know that I will keep pushing for Congress to take action to prevent the daily scourge of gun violence in America” (Kaine, 2019). Jason Crow tweeted after a shooting at a STEM school in his district saying, “It is not enough to send thoughts and prayers, it is empty, it is weak, and it does an injustice to our children who are on the frontlines of this violence” (Crow, 2019). When voting for universal background checks, Crow released a statement saying, “From Columbine to Aurora, our community has been ripped apart by gun violence and it is clear we need more than thoughts and prayers. Today, for the first time in a generation, we took action. We said the House would introduce gun violence prevention legislation in the first 100 days and we kept that promise” (Crow, 2019). Every one of these examples includes a call to action, something missing from the gun-rights responses.

As gun violence has continued to rise, it has become important for candidates to make their stances clear. Jennifer Wexton made advocating for gun control a huge part of her campaign platform, many of her statements containing the language of thoughts and prayers. For example, she tweeted, “I’m running for @GabbyGiffords, for Parkland, for Virginia Tech, for all those killed or injured by gun violence, for our children asking “Am I next?” and for every mass shooting where our lawmakers, like @RepComstock, sent thoughts and prayers and took no action. #VA10” (Wexton, 2018). She also stated “After Sandy Hook, it was all thoughts and prayers and no action, and now, the time has finally come for action and that’s why I’m running for Congress” (Collazo, 2018). After a shooting at the Gilroy Garlic Festival, she tweeted, “I’m tired of senseless mass shootings. I’m tired of gun violence at our festivals and movie theaters. And I’m furious at lawmakers who will offer thoughts and prayers, but won’t lift a finger to pass bipartisan gun safety laws. Enough” (Wexton, 2019). Wexton seems to have an angrier tone

when mentioning thoughts and prayers, like the tone seen by the Parkland students. Many are tired of empty thoughts and prayers, leading towards animosity for the language itself. She also highlights the need for action, following the theme of gun-control advocates. This anger and action statement is not particularly uncommon, Senator Sherrod Brown released a statement after a mass shooting in Dayton saying, “We are also angry - angry that shooting after shooting politicians in Washington and Columbus refuse to pass sensible gun-safety laws to protect our communities. We are still learning about the attack in Dayton and we don’t know exactly what, if anything, could have prevented this specific tragedy. But we know thoughts and prayers are not enough, we have a responsibility to act” (Brown, 2019).

The politicians that receive money from gun control groups have some distinct qualities, most notably that every time thoughts and prayers are sent, there is always a direct mention or follow up of the need for action. These individuals believe that thoughts and prayers alone are empty, and some of the more recent statements even mention the words thoughts and prayers with an angry tone. These politicians see a clear difference between thoughts and prayers and gun reform. You can also see how much less frequently thoughts and prayers are used by these politicians.

It is reasonable to infer based on the above that thoughts and prayers serve a very specific purpose for gun rights groups as compared to gun control groups. Politicians that would affiliate themselves with gun rights use thoughts and prayers as their form of action. Opposing them, politicians that would more closely align with gun control groups specifically utilize both thoughts and prayers as well as the need for action. This would prove the second hypothesis, that this language will be focused in one coalition, on one side of the gun debate. Why would gun rights groups be prone to use thoughts and prayers as a sole response to gun control, instead of

offering more concrete solutions? It can be assumed that a key motivation would be the NRA. Many of the funds that would fall under gun rights donors can be directly linked to the nation's largest gun rights organization, and arguably the most powerful political lobby, the National Rifle Association (NRA). The NRA's legislative arm, the Institute for Legislative Action, is no doubt powerful. They have leveraged their power in local, state, and federal elections, as well as directly in Congress, as they directly opposed and stopped the passage of House Bill S. 34: Denying Firearms and Explosives to Dangerous Terrorists Act. The NRA goes above and beyond in both action and spending to defend the Constitution. In 2014, the NRA spent \$3,360,000 on lobbying (Musa, 2016).

The NRA's Use of Thoughts and Prayers

The National Rifle Association is the leading proponent of gun rights and ownership. Agendas are set by the organization(s) that are in political power. The NRA easily controls the gun lobby, with 5 million members and spending 412,737,440 dollars in 2016 alone (National). There is reason to believe that the NRA specifically encourages a certain type of rhetoric, which then guides a very specific agenda.

In a three-year long undercover observation by Al Jazeera, a team discovered the NRA's strategic plan of action following a mass shooting. Step one is to remain silent, laying low for three to four days after. Step two encourages politicians supported by the NRA to downplay gun laws, where I would assume they instead offer their "thoughts and prayers" Step three is to place blame. The final step is to pull rank, reminding those loyal to the NRA and what it stands for that they cannot be taken down so easily (Timmons, 2018). The NRA has a very broad plan, one that leaves wiggle room for politicians and everyday citizens to interpret how they wish. This now begs the question, is the use specifically of thoughts and prayers rhetoric pushed by the NRA?

The NRA releases multiple publications, many of which are inaccessible if you are not a member. However, I did find multiple NRA written and sponsored articles that go to show that the NRA encourages the use of thoughts and prayers in the wake of a mass shooting. The NRA is a massive organization with multiple branches and facets. When searching the NRA's general website, if you simply search the term thoughts and prayers, there are 7710 results. Even if the NRA were to not specifically instruct politicians and individuals to send thoughts and prayers, they have set the precedent of using this sort of language, as evident by their thousands of mentions of it in their publishing. They are the example gun rights proponents are following, whether explicitly told to or not. The NRA's major lobbying branch is called the Institute for Legislative Action (ILA). An article written by the NRA-ILA's executive director Chris Cox in 2013 starts with a brief overview of the NRA's plan after a mass shooting. He says, "NRA members know what happens every time a tragedy involving guns appears in the news. Your NRA offers thoughts and prayers to the victims, their families and the community, while respectfully waiting for the facts to come to light before commenting in detail" (Cox, 2013). Cox explicitly admits that the NRA offers thoughts and prayers after a mass shooting, as well as waiting for a specific period of time before commenting. The note that "your NRA offers thoughts and prayers to the victims" is an important one. It starts with "your" giving readers some kind of personal claim in the NRA's dealings. The statement also takes a very victim centered approach, not discussing any other details such as guns or perpetrators. He then moves to talk about a strategic sort of waiting period. This period is valuable in the response to a mass shooting, ticking away at the policy window.

A different article, this one from the National Review, supported by the NRA, talks specifically about the politics of prayer. This article begins by addressing the shaming of

conservatives who send thoughts and prayers, and ends with a call to the Left to pray. Author David French says, “Let’s throw this challenge back to the Left. If you reject “thoughts and prayers” in favor of so-called common-sense gun control policies that wouldn’t stop either the Las Vegas shooting or any other mass shooting in the recent past, I’d ask that you’d do something *actually* constructive. Start praying. Because prayer helps. Your policies won’t.” (French, 2017). The NRA supports the use of thoughts and prayers. This massive organization backing this rhetoric has larger repercussions than a few statements being released. The trickle-down effects from the NRA affect millions, directly influencing politicians, and empowering and mobilizing everyday citizens.

The way that various players interact with the rhetoric of thoughts and prayers is important to the way Americans understand and form opinions on gun policy. Though thoughts and prayers can seem like an innocent statement or a genuine condolence, I would assert based on the research that the use of thoughts and prayers is, in fact, strategic, confirming the third hypothesis. It is possible that the gun lobby intentionally floods the media with thoughts and prayers to divert attention from common sense gun laws being passed. This being the case, thoughts and prayers could be considered a political tool, rather than a religious sentiment. From a national organizational level with the NRA, to prominent politicians, and everyday citizens, thoughts and prayers pervade national discourse after a mass shooting, intentionally clogging a policy window, hindering effective change. This discourse also is all focused on one coalition, the gun rights coalition, specifically using it to further their agenda. Thoughts and prayers are not a random national trend, but instead a specific, intentional policy move by the gun rights coalition.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

The puzzle inspiring this research is the way that thoughts and prayers appear after mass shootings. Do these sentiments lead to an overall gridlock in politics after an incident of gun violence? If the use of this language does aid in the gridlock, this language would slow or halt the policy making in the wake of a mass shooting. The reason that thoughts and prayer effectively hinder legislation is because they fill the policy window with their outpourings. This policy window is narrow, and without substantial movement during this period, legislation is not likely to happen. In addition, thoughts and prayers invoke some religious sentiments, which means individual adherents have a deeply emotional connection. This emotional connection is also strategic. Emotions being drawn out aids in the gridlock of gun legislation if it were to ever be put on the agenda. The way that religion is intertwined in policy gets complicated when this emotional piece is so strongly at play. It is also shown that gun owners attend church more often, are more politically conservative, and report higher levels of alienation from society (Mencken, 2017). The conservatism and alienation from society both largely play into a theme of distrust for the government. Understanding these bases give a reasoning for gun ownership, and directly tie it to the cultural factor of religion. The individuals sending thoughts and prayers, and who are religiously affiliated, are the ones statistically more likely to own a gun, and feel that gun laws would affect their freedom to do so. This, again, makes this sentiment a deeply emotional one, which would make passage of laws or implementation of policy much harder. I believe this is a strategic move on the end of the gun lobby, knowing that deeply held emotional ties will make it difficult to initiate change. Further research could be done to discuss options and policy moves to counteract this strong rhetoric from taking such a strong hold on gun legislation discourse.

Further research could also be done based on religious denomination, religious geography, and the way politics are at play from the pulpit.

There are also implications in my research for public policy theory as a whole. First and foremost, rhetoric matters, and should be more closely noted when analyzing policy (Asen, 2010). Future policy implications could also include framework implications, where elements combined in this research could form a more effective way to explain gun policy (and other policies) without having to borrow from multiple frameworks. This can also be helpful in policy formation, where individuals can further study these patterns, and use them to effectively use the policy window rather than sitting in the clogging of it.

Thoughts and prayers are a strategic rhetorical tool, rather than a religious sentiment, when it comes to gun reform in the US. I confirm my three hypotheses: that the rhetorical use of thoughts and prayers do rise sharply after a mass shooting, that the use is centered in the gun rights coalition, and the use of thoughts and prayers is intentional. This establishes a direct link between the sending of thoughts and prayers and the lack of measurable gun reform laws in the United States.

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